

No Body but Yours

Guest Preacher – Daniel Benson

Bloor Street United Church

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 21, 2011

Text: Romans 12: 1 – 8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Matthew 16: 13 – 20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Summer is usually a time for barbecued burgers, corn-on-the-cob, and strawberries and ice-cream. This is sort of a 'default' menu at our house in August. Yet, I found myself the other day thinking about making a stew, something I normally have in the fall. Part of my thinking was that stew is such a great comfort food, but a bigger reason for me is actually making the stew. Sorting out the veggies, selecting the right kind of meat, deciding on what herbs or spices might go in, is all an absorbing and satisfying exercise.

Cooking is a great retreat from a job where you interact with lots of people. Let's face it, it's easier to deal with a bag of potatoes and a bunch of carrots than a lot of people. And this has nothing to do with knives and chopping blocks.

But there's a quiet commitment to the food and to the people that will share it, when you're cooking. I think it gets into the flavour of the food, especially simple, home-cooked food, where there's little pretension but a lot of nourishment, like a hearty stew. It's more work than buying President's Choice lasagne, but that's a small sacrifice.

A small sacrifice – that's a phrase we often use when we're thinking of a task that requires a bit of extra effort. Paul's readers in Rome would have had a very different understanding of sacrifice, when he says "present your bodies as a living sacrifice."

In Rome they would have seen how the various gods were honoured with sacrificial offerings: a Ram slaughtered for Janus, a heifer for Jupiter, an ox for Mars. Sacrifices meant offering something valuable to appease the gods in a messy and bloody way.

And those early Christians would also know about sacrifices from their own traditions and stories. How Abraham took his unsuspecting son Isaac into the wilderness intent on sacrifice. And how Mary and Joseph journeyed from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice of two turtle doves in thanksgiving for safe delivery of their child. There are many more stories of sacrifice throughout the scriptures – Paul knew what he was doing when he chose his words – "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice."

Most of us today, on the other hand, are not that familiar with sacrifices in the way that the Jews or Romans of Paul's time were. It might be the extra effort required to make home-made stew. Or it could be a choice, or even a bargain, in which we go without something for the sake of a higher priority. Parents might put off buying a new car to

cover education expenses for a child; employees are asked to give up wages or benefits when the company is in hard times so everyone can keep a job. We sometimes even do this in our relationships and prayer life. Oh, God, if I get such-and-such, I promise I'll never be bad again.....

And of course, we're familiar with heroic sacrifices – where life and limb are willingly risked or even lost for someone or some cause. Firefighters in Toronto, peace-makers in Palestine and Israel, revolutionaries in Syria, Libya, or Egypt come to mind. And in our community here, there are enormous sacrifices made silently and daily for aged parents, sick loved ones, or friends in need. These are important, critical sacrifices of huge significance on a personal and even global scale.

But when Paul speaks of a bodily sacrifice, I think he's pointing toward something else – maybe not heroic, but beyond the extra effort of home-made, or a good bargain. Something beyond that, yet personal and communal.

What makes me think that Paul has something else in mind, is how he follows his prayer to be living sacrifices, with instructions on getting along with one another. “I say to everyone among you, not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think...”

If you think that this sounds like familiar territory, you're right; it is.

You might recall that in another letter, First Corinthians, Paul devotes a whole chapter to spiritual gifts and creates a conversation in which the body parts argue with each other – who is most important, the eyes, the ears, or the feet? Who is unimportant, the toes, the sense of smell, or the hand?

This competition for ‘who is first’ arises even amongst Jesus’ closest friends, when James and John both ask him, “Grant us to sit, one at your left and one at your right in your glory.”

And numerous times the twelve get into fights amongst themselves about which of them is the greatest, which one of them Jesus’ thinks is best.

So in those first church communities in both Rome and Corinth, and amongst Jesus' own disciples, there is this recurring problem of people not getting along because some are putting themselves ahead or above others. Some want to be first.

That basic, small-group dynamics should be writ large on the church at such an early time is hardly surprising. "People is people," as the saying goes, whether in Jesus' small band of disciples, the early churches scattered around the Mediterranean, or in congregations strung along a busy thoroughfare in Toronto. We all have this in common: that we are people, children of God, blessed with our gifts and our frailties. One of those frailties is the jostling of egos, power, and position that happens whenever two or three are gathered.

So, after a big, rather heavy set up about being a bodily sacrifice, Paul tells the Romans to simply get along – to not think more highly of themselves than they ought, to understand their gifts in their proper place. Your gifts are just that, your gifts; they are not the same as someone else's, they are not better or worse, simply different. He might have simply said, "Get over yourselves!"

Is that it? Get along? Respect one another? Is it that easy? Well, no, because we still have that bit about sacrifice to deal with.

For Paul, sacrifice is a positive term about consecration, dedication, and commitment. It's about using our gifts, our bodies, and minds, and hearts, and turning them toward God. Not giving them up in a bargain, or negotiation, or trading them like hockey cards for something else, but dedicating them freely, without reservation. It's not so much about 'getting over ourselves,' but how we approach the task of 'getting over ourselves.'

Present our bodies as spiritual worship – our worship is not simply in our minds and hearts, something we do on Sunday mornings, but in what we do, how we spend our money and our time, and who we are in our relationships. It's concrete and active, it's how we embody our spiritual values.

It also means recognizing the gifts and roles that we all bring are part of the community – that they exist alongside others, their gifts and roles, and that together we form the community, the body of Christ. "For as in one body we have many

members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many are one body in Christ, and individually we are *members one of another*."

"We are members one of another." That's the key to Paul's meaning of sacrifice. It isn't enough to just respect each other, but to see us all as one *with each other*. What we offer is offered to God – not because we're trading it in to make the community better, or adding it to the mix like potatoes in a stew, but because we *are* the stew – the community – the body of Christ.

Now, I rather like this idea of stew. I love making it, and every time I make a stew, I never know how it's going to turn out. Sure, I've got a recipe, but that's only a guideline. It mostly depends on what's on hand in the fridge, the inspiration of the moment, and the friends and family who will share it.

Sometimes there are lots of carrots, other times, lots of turnips. Sometimes I'll use chicken or beef, and other times it's meatless. At the end of the day, no particular ingredient 'makes the stew,' yet it wouldn't be the same without the variety of ingredients and the unique combination they create. And once added, it's nigh impossible to get anything out completely. If you don't like turnip and you pick out the pieces from your plate – you cannot completely escape its flavour in the potatoes, peas, carrots and gravy. The flavours, like members, become one with another.

This is our sacrifice – our commitment to come together and become the stew, members of another, members of one body. To see ourselves and each other not just as pieces of the stew – a slice of carrot, a chunk of potato – but as the stew itself. And, to recognize that my slice of carrot is neither more important nor less important than his chunk of potato or her peas or the gravy.

And in that stew, it's next to impossible to think of the carrots' or peas' egos getting in the way, as they jostle against each other in the slow cooker. They make their contribution to the body, blissfully accepting their own role in the mix, along with the stock and the turnips and the spuds. Together, they successfully, most of the time, create a body that is nourishing, sustaining, and wholesome.

May we, this community, this pot of stew in a corner of God's creation, be flavourful, compassionate, and nourishing to those we meet. May we be the hands, eyes, feet, and gift of Christ's body to the world.